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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/S:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, DBENZE AND AFERNANDEZ,
IIP/G/NEA-SA RWINCHESTER
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SUBJECT: Damascus Media Reaction: Syria/US, Syria/Senegal,
Syria/Russia, Syria/UK, Syria/Iraq, Lebanon (12/14)

11. Summary: Syrian papers on Dec. 14 reported that President Asad met on Dec. 13 with US Democratic Senator Bill Nelson. Talks focused on the latest developments in Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories. President Asad called for non-interference in Lebanese affairs, since the Lebanese people are capable of understanding each other and national issues. Asad noted that there is interest on the Syrian and American sides to activate dialogue and put in place mechanisms for bilateral cooperation. President Asad underscored the firmness of Syria's positions, calling on the international community to exert efforts with the countries of the region to achieve security and stability. President Asad also reiterated Syria's call to make the Middle East a WMD-free zone, and supported the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

All papers reported President Asad's meeting with Senegalese Foreign Minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio, who conveyed a message from Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade on means of bolstering bilateral relations. President Asad called on Senegal to play a more effective role in the region. Gadio confirmed Syria's important role in the region. Talks during the meeting dealt with activating the role of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Views of the two sides were identical regarding regional issues, particularly on Iraq.

On Syrian-Russian relations, papers reported VP Shara's meeting with a Russian media delegation on Dec. 13, during which Shara reiterated the importance of Russia's role in the regional and international arenas. Shara emphasized the significance of the upcoming visit by President Asad to Moscow for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Papers also cited a statement to SANA by Vitaly Naumkin, Chairman of the Russia International Center for Strategic and Political Studies, depicting Syrian-Russian relations as "good," "historical," and high-level.

On Syrian-UK relations, papers reported VP Shara's meeting with Michael Ancram, British MP and Former Shadow Foreign Secretary, on Dec. 13. Talks focused on the critical situations in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. In a press conference following the meeting, Ancram confirmed that Syria can play a very important role in solving every problem in the region.

Papers also reported that VP Shara held talks on Dec. 13 with former Iraqi PM Ibrahim Jafari. Both sides expressed satisfaction over resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In a

statement to journalists, Jafari said talks dealt with developments in Syrian/Iraqi relations and the political situation in Iraq, as well the conference for Iraqi reconciliation to be held Dec. 16.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad receives a message from Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade concerning means of bolstering bilateral relations. President Asad reviews the latest developments in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories with Senator Bill Nelson. President Asad underscores firmness of Syria's positions, calling for non-interference in Lebanese affairs" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/14)

"The Joint Syrian-Egyptian Higher Committee commences deliberations in Cairo. PM Ottri: Syria and Egypt are cores of joint Arab action. Egyptian PM Nazeef: Syrian-Egyptian fraternal relations are special and distinguished" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/14)

"VP Shara confers with former Iraqi PM Ibrahim Jafari, confirming Syria's support of stability in Iraq. Shara meets Michael Ancram, British MP and Former Shadow Foreign Secretary. Ancram: Syria has a decisive role in solving problems in the region" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 12/14)

"Hizbollah unveils a document from Lebanese MP Sa'ad al-Hariri demanding that Hizbollah surrender the resistance's arms in exchange for stopping the Israeli aggression against Lebanon" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/14)

"Americans reach unprecedented pessimism on Iraq. 'Bush's strategy' is not ready" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/14)

"The EU demands clarifications from Israel concerning its possession of nuclear weapons. Washington keeps silent" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/14)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Medals under Feet"

Khalid al-Ashhab, a commentator in government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (12/14): "Now that John Bolton has gone, there is a long list of candidates to whom the March 14 group leaders in Lebanon will grant the Cedar Medal. This list include US Ambassador in Beirut Feltman and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, the first because he manages the group from inside Lebanon and the latter because he manages it from abroad.

"Bolton was managing the group from the international organization.... The March 14 team's eagerness to stay in power, naturally, is not weaker than the eagerness of the Bush administration and its leaders to remain in the White House. But the difference between the two is that while the Bush team betrayed the world for the sake of its country's interests - oil and domination - , the March 14 team betrayed its country for the sake of the interests of others in it...."

"Repercussions of the Baker-Hamilton Report on US Policy in the Region"

Dr. Sa'id Musallam, a columnist in government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (12/14): "Israel rushed to reject the positive points in the Iraq Study Group's Report, particularly the call for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and the call for a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East and the return of the occupied Golan to Syria. This shows that Israel does not hesitate to abandon its allies when the results are not fully in its favor....

"British Prime Minister Tony Blair was designated to discuss the Middle East file and the calls for dialogue with Iran and Syria and find a face-saving formula, because President Bush finds it embarrassing to make concessions and talk to those whom he has described as rogue or evil people....

"The region awaits the solutions or mechanisms that British Prime Minister Blair will offer to activate the Baker-Hamilton recommendations, and the proposals that he will carry from Bush, especially with regard to the engagement of Syria and Iran....

"The more important question, however, is: What files have the US Administration and its allies prepared in order to get Syria and Iran involved in this solution? Do they believe either of the two countries will offer ready meals on a silver or golden platter, when

the two countries faced, and are still facing, harsh pressure applied by the foolish US policy?

"There are no free gifts to please Bush.... The American failure must be exploited in favor of the national plan, whether by Iran, Iraq, Palestine, or Lebanon...."

"Annan's Speech and Rice's Reaction"

Isam Darin an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (12/14): "In his farewell speech at the UNSC, Kofi Annan objectively criticized the US policy in a polite diplomatic tone....

"What was the thing that angered Miss Rice? Does a simple word of truth trouble the American decision-makers? Can Rice or the Bush administration deny the role of the United States in pushing off peace and unleashing the monster of terror? Can this administration deny its role in marginalizing the role of the United Nations in international issues and in preventing this international organization from performing its mission of protecting world security and peace as the UN Charter stipulates? Can the administration of the neoconservatives ignore the unlimited American support for and legitimization of Israeli terror and the use of the veto against every draft resolution condemning Israeli aggression...?"

"The Bush administration should have responded positively to Annan's message, especially after the successive setbacks that US policy has suffered domestically and internationally. But instead, Rice turned to the same offensive style, proving once again that the Bush administration cannot learn from lessons and experiences."
Roebuck